

*On days one through six, Paramount created Star Trek, and it was good.

*On day seven, because management forced him to work, A. Decker was bored...and so Star Traks was born.

*No days left over, M. Meneks forewent her sleep, bringing BorgSpace into twisted existence as the waking dream between reality and caffeinated drinks.

Fifth Dimension

"You are about to take a journey. A journey not only into the dimensions of sight and sound, but of mind. A journey where the boundaries of imagination are expanded into the infinite. There is a signpost up ahead. Next stop: the Twilight Zone."

Captain had been standing motionless in the nodal intersection nearest his alcove when the voice began to echo over the speaker system and within the minds of every drone of Exploratory-class Cube #347. In part the disruption was a relief, for the game of cho'ack - a virtual card game played within the dataspace - was being lost badly to 8 of 8. The odds against drawing a nova series were astronomical, yet 8 of 8 had done so...twice. Cheating was obviously involved, but Captain had yet to trace the commands his opponent was using to "influence" the supposedly neutral computer.

{Who is playing with the announcement system?} sternly sent Captain to all four thousand drones. {I will find out who did it eventually...but you can save me the trouble by confessing now.} Captain was already beginning to review the automatic logs concerning system usage, looking for tell-tale code trails, but the search was revealing little. General silence continued to greet the subject. Disgusted, Captain regretfully triggered the computer to deal another round of cho'ack.

Approximately five minutes and another losing hand later, the mysterious voice once again began to echo on the intercom, but another source was much closer. Captain whirled on a heel to see what appeared to be a human male standing at an entryway to the nodal intersection. He was fairly tall and well-built in a slender manner. A gray suit with charcoal tie complimented neatly groomed, short black hair. Heavy eyebrows arched over piercingly knowing eyes. Most disconcerting was as the stranger spoke, his teeth were continually exposed in the slightest of ironic smirks.

"The Borg: an egotistical, multispecies, technologically dependent empire which threatens the sovereign individuality of the Milky Way. Sometimes, however, the expected actions of the to-be-assimilated do not play by the script, especially when the playwright hails from the Twilight Zone."

An eerily simple melody of tones followed the odd proclamation, during which the human just...disappeared. No flash of light, no wavering out of existence, no transporter effects; he just gave a final twisted smile before vanishing.

The conundrum of the unknown human and his meaningless proclamations was eventually filed as either (1) a mass hallucination due to events happening elsewhere in the Collective which had managed to filter into the subconsciousness of Cube #347, or (2) a non-corporal entity having a laugh at the Borg's expense. Both solutions were equally likely, and equally irrelevant in the long run. After several days with no reoccurrence, the file was closed and buried in long-term memory storage.

The current mood of the cube was of weary expectation. The final stop on the twenty-

seven system search for colony worlds or a homeworld of species #8511 was drawing closer. The last on a list made many months prior, this system sat in the in the outskirts of a vast nebula. The star and any attendant planets were too young to be the evolutionary cradle of a space-faring race, but colonies were a distinct probability. Assuming there was anything present at all.

The prior twenty-six systems had been empty of the target species (although other beings and phenomenon had been encountered). If no directions of the whereabouts of species #8511 became apparent, Captain anticipated a very long and very tiring tenure as Captain. The assignment to find species #8511 could drag into years in the event of no clues.

Cube #347 exited from transwarp, boldly continuing towards the yellow primary at high impulse while making preliminary scans for the hallmarks of high technology: the babble of space-born communications. Jackpot. Almost immediately the modulated frequencies of subspace, radio, and even light were detected from several places. Concentrations included an M-class planet, its two moons, five large rocks in an asteroid belt, and the Trojan points of the system's largest gas giant. Numerous fainter emissions pointed to a healthy spaceship population. And most exciting of all, that which made the pain of the previous months fade, was that quick sampling of audio confirmed the presence of beings speaking the species #8511 language.

Captain called to Sensors to begin to capture and translate as much information as possible, which the nonhumanoid Borg was already doing. The other hierarchies readied themselves for contact. A consensus was scarcely necessary to be initiated by Captain, although he did so regardless. A fuller connection with the Greater Consciousness was then established to upload preliminary data, provide recommendations from the cube, and ask for directions. The Greater Collection mulled over options, then gave orders to the wayward part of itself before drawing away again. The answer?

{Consensus complete. We have not been detected as of yet. We will proceed to one of the transports currently on a heading between the terrestrial planet and the asteroid complex we will designate as Alpha. Assimilation of occupants will gain better knowledge of species attributes and technology level. If technological or biological distinctiveness is found, Assimilation-class cubes will be dispatched.}

Anticipation was bubbling throughout the nets - Cube #347 was being given (gasp!) responsibility! Of course, if initial resistance was met, the imperfectly integrated sub-collective would also feel the brunt of phasers, torpedoes, and other weapons. {We will not screw up this time,} admonished Captain in a general announcement as he sent the cube powering deeper into the system towards the target transport.

The tenacious arm of the nebula in which the star was embedded exhibited an elevated dust particle count and denser hydrogen/helium concentrations than which would be encountered in a normal system. In the visual spectrum, space had the faintest of blue glows as energetic particles from the primary reacted with the sub-microscopic and elemental dross floating about. Little more than an irrelevant astronomical curiosity, the cube's progress was not hampered.

As the transport came within visual range, Captain activated the large and very nonBorgstandard viewscreen on the wall of the nodal intersection he normally frequented when not in his alcove. The shuffle-clunk sounds of another Borg entering the intersection did not bother Captain, for it was impossible for one drone to sneak up unknown to another.

"The bets on you keeping that thing for much longer are getting long," said Second as he took his place next to and slightly behind Captain. Second's two externally unaltered eyes flicked once at his hierarchy-mate before settling on the screen. "However, I am beginning to understand why you like it better than direct sensor feed or the normal monitors."

"Darn right." Captain took a millisecond or so to check the bet boards, "I'll let my wager ride, thank you." A minute or so of tweaking the display gave a picture of the actively moving transport layered several times with different types of sensor data. Visually the ship was alike to the first one detected, shaped like an elongated dumbbell. As it was an in-system transport, no warp fields could be seen nor were expected; however, the frequencies monitoring impulse activity placed engines in the front globe section. All ships encountered by the Borg previous to those built by species #8511 were mounted rear-wards, slung under the hull, or situated deep within the ship mass. The forward-mounted design, despite a minor inherent instability, was one of the idiosyncrasies which might indicate a technological innovation which the Borg must have to achieve perfection.

At the very least, Captain just wanted to know the name of the bloody stupid engineer who thought up the design in the first place.

The cube was close enough for the transport to detect, unless the ship was flying blind. Continuing monitoring of chatter between it and the asteroid complex suggested several live beings were on board. Translations of the conversations indicated no alarm, or even interest, was directed at Cube #347...almost as if entry of the feared Borg was a common occurrence.

Medium-range scans detected five life signs scattered throughout the ship's rear globe and longitudinal axis. Organic and metal masses were packed tightly within the rest of the vehicle, pointing towards a cargo transport. No shields were active and the limited weaponry arsenal appeared to consist of a communications laser and a small deflector dish modified to demolish asteroids to an estimated four metric tons. In other words, no problems were foreseen; and the nearest possible help would be at least an hour distant at conventional emergency in-system speeds.

Cube #347 broke out of high impulse at the cosmic near-miss distance of ten kilometers. As the ship moved in on its target like a shark homing on a helpless swimmer, tractor beams lanced out to catch the prey. With no modulated shield harmonics to compensate for, capture was easy, even for Captain's normally barely competent sub-collective. A second and third tractor was initiated before the cube slowed to a halt. Finally the alien ship acknowledged the Borg's existence with a hail.

"What do you think you are doing?" came an exasperated audio message.

Captain ignored the hail, busy directing the sub-collective in the infrequently used protocol of first contact. Delta, head of engineering hierarchy, directed the sampling of hull alloys via cutting laser, preparing to compare the data to that gleaned from earlier contact; and Second chose three of Assimilation's hierarchy and two of Weapons' to make the initial transport to the other ship's bridge area in accompaniment of himself. Satisfied all was running smoothly, Captain finally replied.

"Species #8511, we are the Borg. Resistance is futile. Your technological and biological distinctiveness will be added to our own." Captain was especially careful to include the vital plural in the pronouncement...Cube #347 would do something correct for a change! Excitement continued to bubble in the nets, euphoria and non-boredom for the moment keeping all in line. It was not to last.

{Can we blow it up now?} asked Weapons, who was becoming increasingly antsy as the prospect of active resistance in the near future faded.

{No,} replied Captain.

{Why?}

{Because I said so. And because I'll lock out all your weaponry control if you do, and

transfer control of the tractors to Delta.}

{You would not dare!}

{Try it and I'll personally shove you in a torpedo bay and launch you into deep space.}

Pouting silence...for the moment.

On the alien cargo ship, the data collection team materialized from transporter beams onto the bridge. The sensors had placed one of the five life signs in the local area, but the being was not immediately present when the drones appeared. First impressions were of a place where cleanliness was low on the list of priorities. Although each member of the team was outwardly silent, the subspace connection with the other members of the ship sang with comments and critiques.

Squish {What did I step in?} Second looked at the deck under his feet, focusing on the melted-looking object, but could only come to the conclusion that the bright blue color was one not normally found in nature.

{Have you found the main computer terminal yet?} asked 7 of 46 to the other pair from his hierarchy of assimilation. 19 of 46 swept a ream of paper and chunks of a half-eaten bread product from a console while 25 of 46 ungracefully tripped on a step unseen because of an obscuring pile of what appeared to be dirty socks. {No,} was the dual reply.

Meanwhile 180 of 300 and 202 of 300 peered about, searching for the biological occupant. Both were rabidly ready to be terminated by horrible phaser weapons in the name of Cube #347 so that adaptation could commence. Both were being severely disappointed and loudly whining about that fact.

{Found it!} crowed 25 of 46 as she removed a blizzard of purple stick-it notes from a monitor and touch screen, backing off to allow 19 of 46 access when the garishly colored papers refused to unstick from either of her two organic hands (she had four manipulatory limbs). Second squished his way towards one of the three doors leading off the bridge, ignoring the fact his right foot was now stained blue. 180 of 300 had already forced open one, uncovering the empty shaft of an elevator system. 202 of 300 was contemplating another door, but deciding from the bold markings it led to a shrine (and force field impenetrable to Borg subspace frequencies) similar to the one found on the abandoned ship which had begun this whole mess. As data began to be dumped from the computer system to the Borg cube for digestion, Second levered open door number three.

"I'm gone five seconds to take a leak, and ether-dreamed demons appear on my bridge! I'm going to have Ilup's hide for this little daydream! Computer, locate Ilup...now!"

"Ilup is currently grouching in cargo hold twelve," replied a disembodied voice with a gender-neutral tone.

The first look at a live specimen of species #8511 was of a being similar yet different from the original Ghari hologram encountered. The creature was a humanoid biped with typical two legs and two arms, and sporting six eyes of green situated in two horizontal rows of three. Hair, also green, flopped over four holes at the side of the head which might have been ears; no nose was observable, but the large mouth angrily continued to mutter untranslated obscenities. At that point likeness to the hologram ended. Where the psuedoGhari had been thin, this being was quite fat, belly protruding over very unflattering tights of red. A brown jacket-sweater fit over torso snugly to the point of bursting.

Paying absolutely no attention to Second, or to the other five Borg, the being pushed past to the bridge proper.

"Look at the /mess/ these demons are making! I, Fennis, captain of my own transport,

should have total control of the local grouf...but oh, no...Ilup insists on these little acts of rebellion. If he wasn't my nephew, I'd bounce him back home, but then my sister would have one of her absolute fits. Give me a headache to last weeks when it would be done." Fennis was talking to himself. The word "grouf," used as both verb and noun, was not translating.

Captain sorted through the six points of view, shuffling from each to observe as a whole and gain a complete picture. For some reason, the member of species #8511 was completely ignoring the Borg presence. In fact, data from Sensors indicated no one was paying any attention to the happenings. A little irritated, Captain initiated a consensus cascade.

{Assimilation. The materialistic and computer data is useful, but an organic perspective is necessary.}

Unencumbered by either purple stick-it notes or data download, 7 of 46 carefully made his way across the bridge. "Damn, Ilup's most current grouf is good. Incredibly lifelike, if supremely ugly. Mark the boy for a high priest, assuming he ever gets those insane fantasies out of his head," commented Fennis as 7 of 46 approached, a note of pride in an otherwise annoyed voice.

"Hold still, you will be assimilated," said the drone as he reached out for the transport captain's arm.

Surprised, Fennis could only reply, "Hey!" as 7 of 46 grabbed the limb and firmly injected assimilation tubules into flesh. Fennis acquired a glazed look on his face, then fell slack to the ground. Incomprehensible, although the body swiftly faded to a gray hue and sprouted a few visible implants, no new mind was felt by the sub-collective of Cube #347.

Just as Sensors commented, {Sensors now sees a new life sign on board,} a hum began to emanate from an activated elevator. Shaft doors opened behind 180 of 300, disgorging an angry...Fennis.

"What type of ether-demons has Ilup conjured up? Destroyed my second-best body, that thing did, destroyed it beyond recovery. I'm only allowed to grouf so many bodies per cycle, or pay through the nose to the priests for the extraneous expenditure. Ilup's going to have his pay docked! Computer...dock Ilup one quarter cycle of credit, and notify him he will be curfewed on his next leave!"

"Compliance," returned the computer.

Not used to being so totally ignored, Captain was becoming extremely irritated, a feeling which translated itself to the other members of the cube. After fending off another request from Weapons to blow up the ship and assuring himself no rescue effort was being mounted in the system, Captain initiated a further series of orders.

Acting on the commands, Second positioned himself directly in front of the ranting Fennis. "We are the Borg. Resistance is futile. We will not be ignored."

"Ilup. Enough is enough. Get rid of these creatures, or I'll burst your bubble for you. And you will have a very non-grouf headache."

Second silently stared at Fennis, then impatiently gripped the humanoid, swinging him swiftly around to directly inject nanites into the neck, where major arteries to the brain were usually found. As with the other Fennis, the body simply slumped to the ground before assuming the physical look of a Borg...but no new mental presence was detected.

Data download of the transport's information files was nearly complete; Captain assigned members of assimilation, engineering, and his own hierarchy to begin ordering it.

Sensors detects another lifesign in the transport. In an eerie deja vu moment, the elevator hummed into movement, eventually opening doors to yet another Fennis.

"Headache time, Ilup. I am captain of this grouf-group, and I will assert myself." A look of concentration came over Fennis' visage as he half-closed four of his six eyes. "Something is not right here," he said after nearly a minute. "Computer...classify grouf apparitions within one kilometer and display on screen."

A moderately large viewscreen at one side of the bridge started to brighten under a thin film of dried splatters of a liquid and a patina of dust. A high pitched whining sound swiftly ascended the octaves until it was inaudible to the average, unaugmented range of hearing, although Sensors began to loudly complain of bright orange scratches obscuring her intimate link with the sensor grid. The viewscreen flickered once, then displayed a dumbbell shape in which five green dots blinked; eight yellow polygons of various sizes also occupied the screen within and without the transport icon.

"Well...bugger me for a priest...you demons aren't grouf, are you?" Fennis stated in a conversational tone with posture akimbo, seemingly unconcerned despite the fact two of his likenesses were lying on the deck.

Captain rode part of the sub-collective to break the communication protocols of the transport, throwing a stereotypical picture of the catwalks and alcoves of Cube #347 onto the screen. "We are the Borg."

"Never heard of ya...but if you tootle on your way, we won't be having to do anything nasty to you."

"You will be assimilated. Your technological and biological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile."

"Do you have a limited vocabulary, or are you just hard of hearing? I said bugger off!"

"Bugging off is irrelevant. You will be assimilated."

"Assimilated? You mean what you did to my second- and third-best bodies? Get it into whatever you...Borg...use as a brain. Those are /bodies/. They are organic robots created by grouf...and damn expensive ones too!"

Trading more useless 'conversation', Captain continued the inane trite spoutings in order to gain more time to study the data files, especially those that pertained to "grouf". The term "grouf" apparently referred to both the potentiality of the nebula and the moulding of that potentiality, a confusing definition at best. Then Fennis revealed a true nugget of information, one not contained in the database,

"Okay...I and my grouf-mates have conversed back home. Toole is contacting the authorities on Jharin Prime now. However, I see you as a disturbance, and am going to treat you as such. If you do not make reparations for my bodies, we on this ship will have to hurt you."

"Reparations are irrelevant." The phrases 'back home' and 'Jharin Prime', coupled with a threat of contact which were not registering on any known frequency which was normally associated with local faster-than-light communications gave a clue that this system did not contain the homeworld. A new technology appeared to be in use! Scanning of the pilfered information files finally found mention of the current system (unusually buried) to be known as Playground. However, there was also no mention in either technological manuals or general logs of any communications system unknown to the Borg.

"Whatever you say."

Second, feeling something on his foot, looked down. The blue substance was creeping up his leg; a multitude of small dark red eyes opened to glare upwards with a crazed glint.

The sock pile suddenly heaved up and crashed down on 202 of 300, whom had been standing nearby. 180 of 300 moved forwards to kick the smothering garments away, but found

himself banging into a transparent wall. Every direction he turned, the unseen barrier was present, corralling him in an area less than a meter on a side.

Meanwhile, the three of the Assimilation hierarchy were in no better situations. The purple ink coloring the sticky notes still attached to 19 of 46 began to leak, staining the drone with a sticky liquid that subsequently set such that she could barely move. The papers which had earlier been swept to the floor rose up in a blinding flurry, surrounding 25 of 46 until his visual input was little more than white static. 7 of 46 urked as he fell, finding himself trapped on the ground in a clear box like 180 of 300.

On Cube #347, an unusual state of affairs was developing. Mud was beginning to condense on bulkhead walls in the subsection (a quick check confirmed) which was being used as the visual for contact with the transport of species #8511. Unfortunately, that area included the places Captain frequented. Mud was now flowing down the walls to build into slippery piles on the catwalks. Peering out of the nodal intersection, Captain could see his alcove was approximately knee deep in black muck. A swear word echoed loudly in the net, followed by the sound of a body slipping off of a higher catwalk in tandem with the sensation of falling, and ending with a crash and a registration via Doctor for immediate maintenance. With the emergency forcing of consensus, a decision was made.

The six drones on the cargo transport were grabbed with a transporter lock and beamed back to their normal locations in the cube. As soon as Second shimmered into view in the nodal intersection with Captain, he began to swiftly scroll through inventory, attempting to locate a hand-held sterilizer. Ignoring the subsequent materialization of the small device and its use to fry the blue goo into an acrid odor, Captain sent to an eager Weapons, {You may destroy it now.}

The dumbbell-shaped ship was a sitting target, owed primarily to the fact it was still in a firm tractor grip. The transport also proved to have relatively thin hull plating around its forward drive globe, disintegrating into debris after being hit with only two torpedoes. The mud promptly stopped flowing from the walls. Then, between a collective blink and the next, the transport was back...and hailing the cube.

"Borg vessel with the stupid shape, that was not a polite thing to do. I have been given emergency grouf units to regrouf my ship, but only because I am on-site." Mud was now forming /all/ over the cube. In the central engineering area, Delta cursed as a wave of muck dirtied her clean core. "It has been decided to temporarily abandon this system - it was quite a reach anyway for grouf - and compensate those who lost any profit from the shut-down. However, before we go, I must tell you...you have been a very impolite people. I hope this little demonstration of grouf will make you think before you act in the future."

Mud was now forming on the ceiling, only to fall to the floor. And on Captain's and Second's heads. All over the cube, the sticky substance was a nightmare, making movement impossible without ungraceful falls. Some of the stuff was even seeping into interstitial spaces, precipitating shorts throughout the ship. With dismay, the sub-collective calculated it would take /weeks/ to clean up the mess. Just as Weapons was aiming at the resurrected transport, if only to halt the mud formation for a few minutes, the ooze stopped forming.

The transport was gone. Not only had it disappeared, but other than residual communications via sub-light bands, the presence of species #8511 was entirely gone from the system. Population concentrations had vanished and it was impossible to tell an intelligent race had ever occupied the area. Long range sensors directed at asteroid complex Alpha showed a rock unaltered by sentient tools, where a previous examination only hours before had presented a face heavily sculptured and scarred. Sensors' monitoring of esoteric frequency modulations

demonstrated an odd harmonic vibration, one which faded even as the cube listened.

Suddenly, the voice heard many days ago was back again; and as Captain stared up at an intercom speaker, mud dripping from his head to plop to the floor, he somehow knew this would be the last time any in the Collective would ever hear it.

"In the galactic game of cat-and-mouse, the mouse isn't always the helpless creature it seems, and neither is the cat the ultimate predator. Sometimes the mouse simply gets tired of playing with the cat and disappears back through its hole into...the Twilight Zone."